

THE DEVIL TAKES A WIFE

or

THE TALE
OF
BELFAGOR

Written between 1515 and 1520. First published in 1545. The Devil Takes a Wife was the original title, but the story has become famous as The Tale of Belfagor.

Tradition, supported by the old chronicles of Florence, relates that an aged and most holy man whose life was an object of admiration to his contemporaries, being rapt in his prayers, saw through their means how all, or nearly all of the souls of those unhappy beings who die out of grace with God and go to Hell, complained that it was marriage that led them to such a miserable fate. Minos and Rada-manthus and the other judges of the infernal region were much amazed by this, and finding it hard to believe that all these calumnies against the female sex were true, and as the complaints grew day by day, they reported the matter to Pluto and he decided that with all the princes of the underworld he would carefully examine the question and take the course that was thought best to prove it or expose it as a fallacy. After calling them together, then, Pluto spoke as follows:

‘Since, my beloved friends, by heavenly decree, and dread, irrevocable destiny I rule this kingdom, thus cannot be made to submit to any judgment, either of heaven or earth. All the same, as the greatest proof of wisdom on the part of those who have most power is to submit to the law and esteem the opinions of others, I have decided to seek your advice as to how I should act in a matter that could bring such shame to our rule. For as all the souls of men who come into our kingdom claim women to have been the cause, and as this would seem to be impossible, I fear that if we admit their testimony we run the risk of being blamed as over-credulous, and if we do not, as insufficiently severe and but faint friends of justice. And as one is the vice of the frivolous while the other is that of the unjust man, and anxious to avoid being accused of either, but not knowing the means, we have summoned you to aid us with your counsel and ensure that this realm, which has always lived free from scandal in the past, may so continue in the future’.

Each of the princes found the matter of great weight and importance; all agreed that the truth must be discovered, but not how this should be done. For while some considered sending one, and others several of their number into the world in human shape to investigate the truth of the matter in person, many of the others thought it could be managed more simply by forcing a number of souls to reveal it under various sorts of torture. As the majority were in favour of sending someone, however, it was this course that was decided on. And as no one could be found to volunteer to take up the enterprise it was resolved to chose by casting lots. The lot fell on Belfagor, once, before his fall from Heaven, an archangel, now an arch-devil. While reluctant to accept the commission, nevertheless, compelled by Pluto's authority, he prepared to do whatever the council determined and bound himself to observe the conditions which they had solemnly discussed. These were: that a hundred thousand ducats should at once be given to whoever was chosen for the mission, that he should proceed with it into the world and, in human shape, take a wife and live with her for ten years. Then, pretending to die, he should return and report to his superiors on the strength of his experience what the burdens and inconveniences of marriage were. It was further laid down that during this period he was to be subject to all the troubles and ills that men are subject to, and which bring with them poverty, imprisonment, sickness and every other misfortune that men incur, unless he could, by ingenuity or wit, escape them. So Belfagor took the money, and a human shape, and went into the world, and accompanied by his band of horsemen and attendants, made a brilliant entry into Florence—which city he chose above all others to live in because it offered the best opportunities for anyone who wanted to get a high interest on his money.

He gave himself out to be Roderigo of Castile and

rented a house in the Ognisanti district, and as he could not reveal his true origin he said he had left Spain and gone as a child to Syria where he had made his fortune at Aleppo, whence he had come to find a wife in a country more humane, civilised and sympathetic. Roderigo looked about thirty years old and was exceedingly handsome, and when he had shown in the course of a few days the extent of his wealth and that he was a generous and warm-hearted man, many noble citizens, who had more daughters than money, offered them to him. From all these Roderigo chose a most lovely girl called Onesta, the daughter of Amerigo Donati, who had three others who were almost of marriageable age as well as three grown sons, and though his family was among the noblest, and his reputation in Florence stood high, he was, considering his rank and the size of his family, very poor. Roderigo arranged a brilliant and magnificent wedding. He omitted nothing suitable to such a festivity. And as he was subject, under the terms of his leaving Hell, to all the passions of humankind, he had begun at once to relish worldly prestige and ceremony and the good opinion of other men, and this involved him in no little expense. Besides this, he had not been living long with his Onesta before he was up to the ears in love with her and could not bear to see her looking sad or in any way discontented.

Onesta had brought with her to Roderigo not only her noble blood and her beauty but as much pride as Lucifer ever had, and Roderigo, who had tasted both, judged his wife's to be the greater; and it increased more than ever when she realised how much her husband loved her. When she saw that her rule could be absolute in every way she began to order him about without sympathy or moderation, nor did she hesitate, when he denied her anything, to bait him with curses and reproaches. This caused Roderigo untold misery. However, his consideration for her father,

her brothers and the rest of her family, his respect for the marriage tie, and, above all, the depth of his love for her, made him keep his patience. I will say nothing of the great sums he spent to give her the pleasure of wearing the latest fashions and enjoying all the novelties which our city, in her accustomed vein, produces. What is more, to keep the peace with her, he was forced to help his father-in-law marry off the other daughters, which forced him to spend large sums of money. To stay in her good books after that, he fitted out one of her brothers with cloth for the Levant, another with silks for the western trade and set up the other as a goldsmith in Florence. On all this he spent the greater part of his fortune. Furthermore, at carnival time, and on St. John's day, when by ancient custom the whole city makes festival, and many of the noble and wealthy citizens entertain one another with splendid banquets, Onesta was determined that Roderigo's should outshine the rest, so that she would not feel inferior to the other women. All these things he bore for the reasons already given, and despite their oppression he would have put up with them if, as a result, his household had been at peace, and if he had been able to wait for ruin in tranquillity. But it happened quite otherwise, for on top of these crushing expenses her arrogant nature led to one crisis after another. There was not a servant, who could bear to stay in the house more than a day or two, and having no faithful servant to entrust with his affairs was a source of grave inconvenience to Roderigo; even the devils he had brought with him to serve in his household preferred to return to the fires of Hell rather than stay in the world under her authority.

In this worrying and distracted life, and with all his ready money swallowed up by these immoderate expenses, Roderigo began to live on the hope of profits which he expected from his western and Levantine enterprises, and

as his credit was still good, maintained his standard of living by raising loans. As this led to his notes-of-hand circulating widely, however, this was soon noticed by those who engage in this sort of business. And while his position was already delicate, news arrived suddenly from the west and from the Levant to the effect that one of Onesta's brothers had gambled away all Roderigo's goods, and that the other, returning on a ship loaded with his merchandise, which he had not insured, had been drowned together with it.

The news was scarcely abroad when Roderigo's creditors banded together; they suspected him to be bankrupt, but not being able to show their hand until their notes became due, decided that it would be wise to keep a close eye on him so that he could not suddenly spirit himself away. Roderigo, for his part, seeing no way out of his difficulty, and knowing how his powers were circumscribed by the Infernal edict, decided, come what may, to flee, and one morning he mounted his horse and left through the Prato gate, which was near his house. As soon as his flight was known his creditors raised the alarm, notified the magistrates and not only sent the police runners after him but a mob of the people as well.

When the hue and cry was raised, Roderigo was no more than a mile from the city, so seeing the situation was a hazardous one, he decided to flee more secretly by leaving the road and trusting his luck across the fields. The many ditches which crossed the countryside impeded him, and as they prevented him from going on horseback, he left the horse on the road and continued his flight on foot, going from field to field — planted, as is common in that part of the country, with vines and reeds — till he came out near Peretola at the house of Gianmatteo del Brica, a man who worked for Giovanni del Bene. By chance he found Gianmatteo, who had come home to feed

his oxen, and explained his position, promising that if he would save him from the hands of his enemies, who were pursuing him in order to imprison him till he died, he would make his fortune, and that before he left he would produce proof of this, or, if he did not, would willingly yield himself into his enemies' hands. Gianmatteo, although a peasant, had his wits about him, and reckoning that he had nothing to lose by helping, agreed, and hurried him on to a dung heap in front of his house, concealing him with old reeds and other refuse he had got ready to burn.

Roderigo was no sooner hidden than his pursuers appeared; for all their threats, they were unable to make Gianmatteo say that he had seen him, and so went on until, after searching in vain for the rest of that day and the next, they returned exhausted to Florence.

When the noise had died away, Gianmatteo let him come out and asked him to make good his promise.

'My brother', Roderigo said to him, 'I am deeply obliged to you and fully intend to reward you; and so that you will not doubt that I can, I will tell you who I am'.

Then he told him what sort of being he was and the conditions on which he had left Hell, and about the wife he had taken, and he went on to describe the way he was going to make him rich, which was, in brief: if Gianmatteo heard of any woman becoming possessed, he could assume that the spirit responsible was himself, and that he would refuse to leave her unless he came to exorcise her; so he would have the chance of getting what he liked by way of payment from the woman's family. And when that had been arranged, he vanished.

Not many days passed before the news was spread through the whole of Florence that a daughter of Ambruogio Amidei, whom he had married to Bonaiuto Tebalducci, was possessed by a devil; her family tried all the remedies usual in such a situation, touching the girl's

head with the mantle of San Giovanni Gualberto and with the head of San Zenobi, all of which Roderigo merely laughed at. And to make it clear to everyone the girl was really possessed, and not suffering from some other mental disturbance, he spoke Latin, argued points of philosophy and discovered a number of people's sins, revealing, for instance, those of a monk who had kept a woman dressed in his order's habit in his cell for more than four years. All this aroused a general amazement, and made Ambrugio's life a misery. He had tried every remedy in vain and had lost all hope of her recovery when Gianmatteo came to him and promised to restore his daughter's health if he would give him five hundred ducats with which to buy a farm at Peretola. Ambrugio agreed, whereupon Gianmatteo, after having masses said and dressing up the occasion in a certain amount of ceremony, bent down to the girl's ear and said,

'Roderigo, I have come to hold you to your promise'. To which Roderigo replied, 'I am willing. But this is not enough to make you rich. So when I have left here I will go into the daughter of Charles, King of Naples, and I will leave her for no one but you. You can then make whatever sum you like. But after that, do not trouble me again'.

And after saying this he left the girl, to the joy and wonder of all Florence.

It was not long after that when all Italy heard of the misfortune which had befallen the daughter of King Charles. As in this case, too, no remedy could be found, the King, hearing about Gianmatteo, sent to Florence for him, and after some bogus ceremony he cured her. Before he left the girl, however, Roderigo said,

'You see, Gianmatteo, I have kept my word and made you rich. Now we are quits and I am not bound to you any more. So you would be wise to keep out of my way,

for I will hurt you in the future just as I have helped you now'.

Gianmatteo went back to Florence a wealthy man (he had received more than fifty thousand ducats from the King) and expected to enjoy his riches in peace and quiet, not imagining, in fact, that Roderigo had any intention of harming him. But his peace was suddenly shattered by the arrival of news that a daughter of Louis the Seventh, King of France, had become possessed. This news thoroughly disturbed Gianmatteo when he considered both the authority of the King and the declaration of Roderigo. The King, indeed, unable to find any remedy for his daughter and hearing of Gianmatteo's powers, sent for him by means, in the first place, simply of a messenger. But when Gianmatteo pleaded illness the King was forced to have recourse to the city government, which compelled him to obey.

So he went, with despair in his heart, to Paris, and explained at once to the King that while it was true that in the past he had cured the possessed, this did not mean that he knew how to, or would be able to cure them all, because some of them were possessed by spirits of so evil a nature that they feared neither threats nor exorcisms nor anything that religion could do. For all this, he would do his duty, and begged forgiveness and pardon if he should fail. To which the King roundly answered that if he failed to cure her he would have him hanged. These words filled Gianmatteo with despair. However, he put a bold face on it and had the possessed girl brought to him. Then, leaning close to her ear, he humbly commended himself to Roderigo, reminding him of the service he had done him, and what an example of ingratitude he would become if he deserted him when his need was so great.

'What, treacherous boor', Roderigo replied, 'do you dare come before me? Did you think you would be able

to boast that you became rich through my means? I intend to show you and everyone else that I know how to give and to take away as I choose, and before you get away from here I will make sure you are hanged'.

Since there was no escape in this way Gianmatteo thought he would try his luck in another. He had the possessed girl taken away and said to the King,

'Sire, as I have told you, there are many spirits so evil that no impression can be made on them, and this is one of that sort. However, I would like to try a last resort; if it succeeds, then our aim will have been achieved, if not, I will be in your hands, and you will give me what mercy my innocence deserves. Meanwhile, have a large scaffold built in the square before Notre Dame, big enough to hold all your nobles and the clergy of the city, have it covered with silks and cloth of gold, and set up an altar in the middle. Next Sunday morning I want you, and the clergy, and all your princes and nobles to assemble on it with royal pomp and dressed in magnificent robes, and after celebrating a solemn mass, have the possessed girl brought there. I want there to be besides in one corner of the square at least twenty men with trumpets, horns, drums, bagpipes, flutes, cymbals and any other loud instruments who, when I raise my hat, are to sound their instruments and march towards the scaffold playing them. All this, and certain other secret methods will, I believe, put this spirit to flight'.

The King at once ordered it all to be done, and when Sunday morning had come and the scaffold was crowded with dignitaries and the square with the populace, mass was celebrated and the possessed girl was led on to the scaffold by two bishops and many noblemen. When Roderigo saw such a crowd gathered and such elaborate preparations he was greatly taken aback and said to himself,

'What does this miserable peasant think he is up to?

Does he think he will frighten me with all this show? Doesn't he realise that I am used to seeing the marvels of heaven and the terrors of Hell? I will punish him, come what may'.

And when Gianmatteo went up close and begged him to depart, he answered,

'Oh, you have had a fine idea! What do you expect to do with all your apparatus here? Do you think that will help you escape from the King's wrath and from my power? Vile peasant, I will get you hanged for sure'.

And what with renewed pleas and repeated insults, Gianmatteo thought he had better lose no more time. He made the signal with his hat and all those who had been entrusted with making the noise struck up their instruments and came towards the scaffold with a din which reached the skies. At the noise, Roderigo pricked up his ears, and not knowing what it was, in his astonishment and bewilderment, asked Gianmatteo what was happening, and Gianmatteo, in great excitement, replied,

'Alas, my poor Roderigo! It is your wife coming to fetch you back!'.

It was marvellous what a revolution the bare mention of his wife produced in Roderigo's mind. It was such that without thinking whether it was possible or likely for her to be there, and without another word, he fled in panic, leaving the girl cured; preferring to return to Hell to give an account of his actions than to subject himself again to the troubles, humiliations and hazard of the matrimonial yoke. And so Belfagor witnessed, on this return to Hell, to the evils which women bring with them into the home. And Gianmatteo, who had kept his wits about him better than the devil himself, went home full of joy.